

RANGOON—Some of the bigger parties contesting Sunday's election in military-ruled Burma have raised fresh complaints of unfairness, including voters being threatened if they don't back the ruling junta's party.

One party leader said the junta's proxy, the Union Solidarity and Development Party, and local authorities had stepped up their intimidation of voters in recent days as "the USDP feels threatened by the popularity of the democratic parties."

The election, the country's first in two decades, is part of the ruling junta's self-proclaimed "road map to democracy," but it has been widely panned as a sham designed to cement military rule. The main opposition party, detained Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy, has refused to take part in the polls, claiming the process is unfair and undemocratic.

Her party won a landslide victory in Burma's last election in 1990, but the military refused to hand over power.

Other parties not aligned with the junta are taking part in Sunday's vote, but the Union Solidarity and Development Party enjoys advantages of size, wealth and organization over its contenders.

Khin Maung Swe, leader of the National Democratic Force party, said Friday that many voters were being forced to take part in advance voting, which allows authorities to gauge voter sentiment ahead of the actual polls and manipulate the vote if so inclined.

He gave the example of a village in Mandalay division where the ward council chairman asked at least one member of each household to cast an advance vote. He said one man voted for the NDF and was told to bring 10 cart loads of sand and repair a local road as punishment.

He also said authorities in some areas were manipulating the electoral rolls, which is another way that voting can be rigged.

The NDF is the nation's third biggest party, with 164 candidates, just a fraction of the 1,112 candidates running on the ticket of the junta-backed party.

The Democratic Party (Myanmar), which is fielding 47 candidates, as well as the National Unity Party, second in size with 995 candidates, have made complaints similar to those of the NDF. Thirty-seven parties, most of them tiny, are contesting the polls.

Democratic Party chairman Thu Wai said local officials threatened villagers after his candidate from Myitha constituency in Mandalay division campaigned there.

"Her sister, who is a schoolteacher, was also threatened with loss of her job as she provided meals to her sister during her campaigning," he said.

The Shan Nationalities Democratic Party—the fourth largest with 156 candidates—complained that villagers in Shan state, its homeland, were asked to cast advance votes and harassed if it

was learned they did not vote for the USDP.

Khin Maung Swe accused the official election commissions at both the local and national levels of failing to respond to the complaints. Their inaction, he charged, "makes the Election Commission not independent and also make the elections less credible."

"The Union Election Commission is failing in its duty and is a discredit to the commission by remaining silent on these reports and not taking any action against errant parties," he said.

USDP leaders and government officials were not immediately available to respond to the criticism.

Prime Minister Thein Sein, who is also leader of the USDP, said on Oct. 24 that the government was "determined to do (its) utmost for the successful conclusion of the free and fair general election based on past experiences and lessons learned in the best interest of the country and the people."

European Union countries represented in Burma issued a complaint of their own Friday.

In a terse statement, they said that EU embassies in Rangoon—those of Germany, Italy, France and the United Kingdom—would not accept government invitations to participate in "explanatory tours" on election day due to rules applying to the visits. The statement did not elaborate.

Western nations have said the junta's election plans don't meet acceptable standards of fairness.